



Episode 427: Was Jesus a Socialist? Guest: Larry Reed

WOODS: There is a meme circulating on Facebook. I don't know if you've seen it, but it's got two panels. One of them has Jesus Christ, and the other one has Bernie Sanders.

REED: (laughing)

WOODS: It's shameless, right?

REED: Yeah.

WOODS: And it has a few similarities between the two men, and one of them, allegedly, is that each one is a socialist. But yet, the crazy right-wingers – because that's the world that people who make memes like this live in; there's right-wingers and left-wingers, and that's the world – the right-wingers seem inexplicably to love one of these men and despise the other, and doggone it, there's just no figuring these people out. That seemed relevant to our conversation today in talking about your article on "Is Jesus a Socialist?" This article that you wrote, I don't remember exactly how long, but not terribly long ago, made a big splash, had a great many shares. And now you've actually converted it into a PDF little e-book.

REED: That's right, and it's also available as a hard copy pamphlet, which you can order from our website at FEE.org. It really has made quite a splash.

WOODS: You were telling me before that you had updated the website, so the share count was reset. But initially, the article had how many shares?

REED: More than 15,000 shares, which translates into many times at many readers, of course.

WOODS: Right, the share figure is – it's one thing for people to click "Like" on something, but when they share it, and then their own audience can see it, it's really something. So obviously, you struck a nerve somewhere.

REED: I think so.

WOODS: Okay, so why is that?

REED: Well, there is a general misconception out there that Jesus would be somehow friendly to socialist ideas or to the redistribution of wealth. That's implied in that meme that you just referred to. But I'm not a theologian; I'm an economist and economic historian. But I scoured the Bible, and I could not find anything remotely connected to what I think is socialism in Jesus' teachings. Socialism isn't simply the sharing of things – I mean, we all do that. But socialism in the modern political context is the use of force to redistribute wealth, or to command resources, or to put government in some way in charge of the economy. And Christ never advocated the use of political force for any purpose.

WOODS: And it seems to me that this error is just a subset of a much greater progressive, so-called, error, namely the conflation of state and society to the point where their view is if you don't want the state doing something, then you don't favor the doing of that thing. That's obviously a logical leap. And so likewise, they seem to think that conversely if you do favor the doing of something, that must mean you're perfectly okay if the state does it.

REED: Yeah. You know, statist tend to – well, by definition – to worship the state. They tend to see things through a statist prism. Everything that is good in life, the state either has to be involved or is involved in some way. I was on a television show once in the Bahamas, and a gentleman who was doing the interview asked me about the story of the Good Samaritan. And he said, well, doesn't that show that Christianity supports socialism? And I said, wait a minute. Think of the example of the Good Samaritan. This guy comes along on a road, and he comes upon a man who's down and out and injured and desperately in need. The Good Samaritan did not call his congressman; he didn't say to the man along the road, "Well, you need to go find a government bureaucracy to help you out." No, he helped him personally. And that's why he's a "good Samaritan." If the guy had simply walked away and said, "This is the government's responsibility," we wouldn't think of him today as the Good Samaritan; we'd think of him today as a good-for-nothing.

WOODS: Well indeed. Now there are a number of parables – in addition to talking about the Good Samaritan, we can point to a number of parables that you can actually say clearly do support the idea of private property and the idea of just earning what you can earn and not griping about not earning more, but just earning what you more or less deserve. So for instance, we've got here the Parable of the Talents, which I know a lot of libertarian Christians are very fond of citing. What's the lesson to take away from that?

REED: In the Parable of the Talents, which Christ himself relates, there are three men who are given the same amount of money, of talents, and they go off and do various things with it. And when they come back and report to the man who gave the talents to them, it's apparent that one man turned it into a whole lot of money; he invested it and invested wisely. Another guy turned it into a fairly small return. And the third guy, proud of himself, just buried it in the sand, and then said, well, I didn't lose anything.

And the guy who turned it into the most amount of money is the one who is praised in the parable. And the man who just buried it, didn't do anything productive with it, he's not only criticized in the parable; the talents that he had are taken from him and given to the first guy who turned it into the most amount of money. So the message there is certainly not one of any kind of political redistribution; it's not one of anti-profit; it's not anti-investment. It's very much pro putting your money to the best possible use to get the highest return.

WOODS: Now, I realize this one is not the most relevant episode, but I've always been especially fond of it: the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. And people come to work in the vineyard, and they agree to work for such and such wage, and then some people come really late in the day with maybe an hour left in the day, and yet they're still getting the same wage that the earlier people got. And some of those people start to gripe. How does that turn out?

REED: Yeah, this is one of my favorites too, Tom. The farmer who hires these workers realizes that time is of the essence, and the first workers who come and work for the full day contract for a certain wage. But late in the day, he realizes that there's so much yet to be done; it's got to be done quickly, so he has to pay a premium in the marketplace to attract the additional workers. He ends up paying the workers he hired late in the day who work only an hour or two, the same that he offered the workers first thing in the morning.

And of course, those workers who worked all day, some of them complained to him and said, wait a minute, how come the guys who came for just an hour or two got the same as I did and I had to work all day? And his reply basically is, look, I paid you what I offered. I kept my word. We had a contract. Supply and demand conditions were different later in the day, and I paid what I had to to get the additional workers. Quit complaining. You got what I promised; so did the others, and that's the end of it. There's no hint of redistribution or equality of income. None of that stuff the progressives like to talk about is part of that parable at all.

WOODS: We see this as a pretty consistent theme in the work of the Late Scholastics, who seem to be of the view that the fact that somebody consents to a wage is prima facie that the wage must be just. If it's their best option, then they take it, and that's it. That's the end of the discussion. So I'll link to on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/427, we'll have a link to your essay on whether Jesus is a socialist, but I'll also link to my conversation with Alex Chafuen, who is the expert on the Late Scholastics, and to the episode I did by myself on Pope Francis, which, whether you're Catholic or not, you'll enjoy listening to me talk about that; I assure you.

All right, I want to run through, maybe if not a lightning round, because I don't want to rush you, but I just want to just tick off a few common examples of Biblical citations that people will throw at somebody like Larry Reed, who's been making an article like this. And I want to hear what your response is. So what about the classic passage about, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars, and unto God the things that are God's." Isn't this an open-ended invitation to just tell people, whatever you're

being asked to do in terms of taxation, just go ahead and do it, because Caesar really has a prior claim on everything you have.

REED: Well, I certainly don't see it that way. Christ did not say, "Render unto Caesar whatever he demands and however he demands and no matter what situation it leaves you in." This is a call, effectively, to respect for property. "Render unto Caesar's what is Caesar's." It doesn't say everything is his.

And so some people kind of jump to a conclusion here and say, oh, this justifies whatever Caesar may demand. What if he wants everything? What if he wants your money and your life? Christ is not saying, that will be fine; if it's his if he so says. He was giving a very clever answer to some Pharisees who were eager to trap him, and I'm sure he was also thinking of, is this a hill I want to die on? Do I want to go any further than to say, to each person his own; he's entitled to what really is his. That leaves open the question of what is legitimately Caesar's. Maybe it's 10%, maybe it's 2%, maybe it's nothing at all.

WOODS: What about the money changers in the temple, driving the money changers from the temple? Isn't that some kind of expression of a disdain for commercial activity as being something grubby and beneath human beings?

REED: Well, notice that there's no place in scripture where you find Christ driving the moneychangers or anybody involved in market behavior from marketplaces. The context here is that he's driving moneychangers from the Lord's house, from God's temple, from God's house. And he's basically saying this is not the place for that. And that's the only place you find him driving people, moneychangers, from the temple. And there was also the context of some of these people were charging for entry into the temple, which Christ thought there was no place for that either. So it's the context that's important here.

WOODS: Of course, the Romans 13 objection will be raised, and maybe at some point I should probably do an episode on Romans 13. I'll also link on the show notes page to an essay by Jared Casey of Ireland that deals I think pretty effectively with the Romans 13 objection; in fact, I'd better write that down, because I'm in middle age now, and you know how the memory is.

So let's go ahead and address Romans 13. What is it saying? Because according to what you write here in your essay when you initially posted this, apparently it hadn't referred to Romans 13, which doesn't directly deal with your subject – so it's no wonder it wasn't mentioned – but apparently this was a common progressive objection. How did you then deal with it?

REED: Yes, I do deal with it in the later editions of the essay. In Romans 13, the Apostle Paul seems to be urging submission to the governing authorities, and he's warning against rebellion. And he also says that if you owe taxes, pay your taxes. So a progressive of today would say, ah, this blesses all sorts of things, including

redistribution, a welfare state, whatever the state either wants to do for you or to you.

And I maintain that that's quite a leap. Again, context is quite important here. Paul was speaking to early Christians. The environment was seething with anti-Roman feeling, and undoubtedly, he didn't want the growth of Christianity to be sidetracked by violence or other provocations. He was trying to set the people's sights on what he thought of as higher things, of greater immediate importance.

But it's even a bigger error when progressives take what Paul said to justify one particular view of the role of government, namely the progressive or the socialist one. Suppose the governing authorities run a minimal state with constitutional strictures and guarantees of personal liberties and private property? And suppose that the rules of that arrangement clearly say, as you might say America's founders put in writing, we protect you from aggressions against your rights and your property, but we don't otherwise give you stuff. You're entitled to liberties to engage in private voluntary commerce, to deal with each other peacefully, and don't do any harm to anybody else. And the government's not going to rob Peter to pay Paul. It's not going to give you stuff.

There's nothing in Romans 13 that says that those governing authorities in this kind of minimal state environment, there's nothing that says that governing authorities would be owed any less respect than if they were welfare state, socialist redistributionists. So it's really a leap of faith, you might say, to jump from what Paul says to say, ah, therefore everybody should obey everything that any government says or tells them to do. That's not what it's about at all.

WOODS: Moreover, I wonder what these progressives would think about conscientious objectors. Would they really say that Romans 13 forecloses the possibility of your being a conscientious objector? I've never heard them say that, so I can't imagine, Larry, that progressives might be inconsistent or contradictory or hypocritical, but it seems that that principle would involve them in that.

And also, Lawrence Vance has made the argument that it seems interesting that people, a lot of Christians who supported the war in Iraq were critical of people against that war on the grounds that Romans 13, the authorities have told you you've got to support this. But why don't they say the same thing about people in Iraq fighting the war? Why don't they say, well, we can't blame these people, because Romans 13. They've got to obey Saddam Hussein. Obviously on some level, they realize that this can't mean what they think it means.

REED: Yeah, you'd think so, but you know, progressives and a lot of other folks are not necessarily very consistent in their thinking. The Bible is full of stories about people who bravely and righteously resisted the overreach of governments. In fact, in my essay I ask the question, does anyone really believe that if Jesus had been preaching just before the exodus of the Jews from Egypt, that he would have declared, "Pharaoh demands that you stay, so unpack your bags and get back to work." I mean, all

throughout the Bible, you find heroic examples. Hebrews defying Pharaoh's decrees to murder their infants. Rahab lying to the King of Jericho about Hebrew spies. On down the list. I cite a lot of these in my essay. And my friend, Jeff Tucker at the Foundation for Economic Education, has put it very well. He says, Mary, Jesus, and Joseph fled Bethlehem, rather than submit to Herod's order to kill all infants. And so if Romans 13 meant that everyone must submit always, Jesus would have been murdered in the weeks after his birth. So resistance of course can be moral, and Christianity has inspired resistance to the state throughout history and even in modern times.

WOODS: I want to skip ahead to what we read in Acts about Christians sharing their property with one another, because this has been cited time and again as evidence that the Christian faith in some way demands socialism. But yet, isn't this very easily answered?

REED: Oh, absolutely. There's no evidence that the early believers, members of the Early Church were required to dispossess themselves of all property. They continued to meet in their private homes, and that's abundantly evident in the Book of Acts. But in any event, there were requirements that you put the teachings of Christ ahead of other worldly things if you wanted to be an activist and a leader in the Early Church. But that wasn't necessarily – that wasn't a commandment for all people. It has nothing to do with the progressives' call today for the state to redistribute income or take from anybody. This is simply a requirement or a suggestion for those in a particular role within a voluntary organization, the Early Church.

WOODS: Exactly. That's the key point, that no force was used or even implied at any time. If people want to live that way, we would be the last people on Earth to tell them they can't. Of course, that's their own choice. And that's what this fundamentally gets down to. You can't find me a single word by Christ commanding the use of force for this goal.

And by the way, the progressives have no problem using this line of argument in other areas. They'll say, well Christ never mentions, let's say abortion, or never mentions such and such, so therefore, we can leap to all other sorts of conclusions about those issues. But when it comes to the welfare state, where there's not one word about the use of politics or force, they nevertheless extrapolate as if that's a legitimate extrapolation. And that's the key issue.

REED: Yeah, and you know, Christ of course upheld the teachings of the Ten Commandments, which he identified as the Law. And the Eighth and the Tenth Commandments say a great deal about things like private property and redistribution. The Eighth and Tenth Commandments warn us against envy and coveting, and one of them specifically says, "Thou shalt not steal." It doesn't say, "Thou shalt not steal unless the other guy has more than you've got," or, "Thou shalt not steal unless you really think you could spend it better than the guy who earned it," or, "Thou shalt not steal unless you hire a politician to do it on your behalf."

WOODS: What about, though, when Christ suggests how difficult it's going to be for a rich man to enter Heaven?

REED: Yeah, this is a warning against allowing secondary things, like wealth, to rule your life. He's observing that wealth is a temptation. Well, we know that. There are lots of temptations in life. Christ is saying, keep your eyes on the prize. Don't allow earthly goods or any other temptation, frankly, to draw your attention away. And if you've got great wealth, recognize that with it comes great temptation. But he'd be the last person to say it's impossible for a person of great wealth to also be a believer, a Christian, a man or woman of great character. He's simply warning against the temptations that come with great wealth, as they come with so many other things in life.

WOODS: Well, Larry, hits has been – not only has this been a great conversation, but it's been so packed with information. It's one of these episodes people will listen to repeatedly. I get that a lot: "I have to listen to your episodes twice to absorb all the stuff." Because I try to put as little fluff in these things as possible. I want people to get 20 to 25 minutes of solid information, and boy have you over-delivered in this particular one.

REED: Thank you, Tom.

REED: I'm going to make sure and link, as I said, to the essay at TomWoods.com/427, so if you're driving around listening to this, you don't have to jot anything down except the number 427 to get to today's show notes page to read this and to listen to related episodes, including the last time Larry and I spoke when we talked about the history of FEE, because it's a major ingredient, a major episode in the history of the whole freedom movement. So, Larry, as always, your time is greatly appreciated, and your insights even more so. Thanks so much.

REED: Hey, thank you, Tom. It's been pleasure and an honor; I appreciate it.